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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0531
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0468
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 2073
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0878
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0546
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000220

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KDEM MR

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ABDALLAHI REACTS TO RECENT EVENTS; FEARS
ECONOMIC SITUATION

REF: STATE 25557

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In the Charge's fourth visit to Lemden, President Abdallahi expressed concern for Mauritania's economy, and the lack of international reaction to Qadhafi's failed "mediation" efforts. He offered his side of the story with his meeting with Qadhafi, and reiterated his belief that his own initiative was the only way to genuinely solve the crisis. He verified the authenticity of an audio recording between him and two High State Council generals leaked on the internet, and asked the USG to continue to remind its international partners of the AU's strong position against the coup. End summary.

¶2. (C) Charge and PolAsst met President Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, Presidential Spokesman Ahmed Samba, and Presidential Chief of Staff Ahmed Kaber Ould Hammoudi March 22 in Lemden. This was the Charge's fourth trip to Lemden since the coup (previous visits occurring on November 13, December 9, and February 10). Chief of Staff Ould Hammoudi had requested Charge make this visit. Charge briefed Abdallahi on current USG efforts such as the demarche urging governments to reaffirm strong AU PSC support in the wake of Muammar Qadhafi's "mediation" (Ref A). Charge reiterated the USG's strong position against the coup, and that the June 6 elections as currently planned by the junta were unacceptable.

Mauritania fatigue?

¶3. (C) Abdallahi offered his analysis of the current interior and exterior political situation. Fearing that the international community was "tiring of the Mauritanian problem," Abdallahi asserted that time was working to the junta's advantage. On the other hand, he lauded the courage of Mauritians in opposing the coup (singling out specifically FNDD co-leader and PND President Abdel Koudouss Abeidna, who he described as "very brave"). He reiterated that despite what some might say, Mauritania is ready for democracy, and even more important, ready to defend it.

Economic concerns

¶4. (C) Abdallahi expressed "dread" and "deep concern" regarding the economic situation in Mauritania. Noting that the budget deficit was at least 10% of GDP and projected to rise to 20% of GDP in 2009, Abdallahi stated that the first responsibility of the government should have been to explain the economic crisis to the people and offer a "modicum of reality." Instead, he said, they have not offered a single word about the reality of the situation, with Aziz making promise after promise with no explanation as to how he will deliver.

Qadhafi: "You will be a hero"

¶5. (C) Abdallahi offered his account of the "mediation" effort led by Qadhafi. Noting that relations between him and Qadhafi had never been particularly close, he believed that Qadhafi was not happy about him arriving to power through democratic elections. This impression was confirmed in Libya when Qadhafi asked him to resign, saying "You would be a great hero to Mauritania." Abdallahi then replied, "No, I would be a great traitor to Mauritania." Qadhafi then accused him of being an agent of the U.S. During his meeting with Qadhafi, Abdallahi observed that Qadhafi used the language of Aziz in describing the political situation in Mauritania, referring to "communists" and "blockages" in the government institutions. "I don't know what kind of relationship those two (Qadhafi and Aziz) have established," Abdallahi said, clearing implying that the two had arrived at

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some sort of agreement. Abdallahi also expressed concern about the reaction (or lack thereof) among the international community following Qadhafi's "mediation" visit to Mauritania. Note: Although Abdallahi expressed concern, he admitted that he had not reached out either -- he had not spoken with Arab League President Amr Moussa in at least a month, and he had not spoken with Jean Ping since Qadhafi's departure. End note.

Abdallahi's initiative

¶6. (C) Abdallahi stressed that his initiative was "the only solution" to the crisis. "I have offered the maximum concessions that I am going to make." Describing his own return as a non-negotiable point, he again reiterated a willingness to enter into any discussions regarding his or the government's future after his return. "Power does not interest me," he said. Abdallahi recognized that the fall-out from Qadhafi's visit had again pushed the FNDD and Ahmed Ould Daddah's RFD closer together and he accepted Charge's assessment that having a united front was far better than being divided regardless of any personal problems between the two. He saw that early elections under an Abdallahi-led transition would offer Ould Daddah his best chance for fulfilling his own political ambition; however, Abdallahi played a little bit coy in noting there would be early elections after an eventual return IF that was the political consensus. He also left open the idea that he might run again.

The (BASEP) fly on the wall

¶7. (C) Charge asked Abdallahi about the story that appeared on the news site Taqadoumy.com that morning regarding the leak of a recording made the day before Abdallahi was transferred to house arrest in Lemden in November 2008. The

recording, over two hours long, contains discussions between Generals Mohamed Ould Hadi and Mohamed Ould Meguett, and President Abdallah in the Palais de Congres. Abdallah confirmed to Charge the authenticity of the recording. Comment: The recording proves that contrary to what the Minister of Interior said at the time regarding Abdallah's supposed pledge to stay out of politics, Abdallah in fact took a strong principled stand and made no such deal with the junta. Also, the recording continues after Hadi and Abdallah have left the room, indicating that the presidential security battalion (BASEP) bugged the room, rather than Hadi personally recording the encounter. End comment.

¶8. (C) Abdallah's son stated before the meeting that Aziz is a bit enamored of technology and likes to record everything. Furthermore, Abdallah's son claimed that there is a recording of Daddah and Aziz that, if released, would be very damaging to Daddah. In the recording, Daddah supposedly offers himself up to Aziz as the military's candidate in upcoming presidential elections -- something he has repeatedly criticized Abdallah for supposedly doing in the 2007 presidential elections.

Abdallah's concerns

¶9. (C) The AU after Qadhafi: Charge noted that we were getting mixed responses from African members of the AU PSC in advance of this week's meeting on Mauritania. Abdallah said his representative in Addis Ababa was getting similar mixed signals with a particular concern about the position being taken by Benin which holds the rotating presidency. The President sensed the Libyans had been pressuring those countries that benefit from Libyan largess to back Qadhafi's statements in Nouakchott in support of the junta's agenda. Abdallah was guardedly optimistic, however, that the built-in dislike some members had for Qadhafi would play in

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his favor with the PSC again restating its pre-Qadhafi visit position on sanctions.

¶10. (C) Lack of Sanctions: Abdallah asked Charge about progress on targeted economic sanctions. Charge noted that discussions were ongoing, but given the change in USG administration in January, the extensive procedural requirements to approve our list was not yet complete. Abdallah urged quick action since targeted financial sanctions would have the most significant effect on the regime -- particularly its business backers. Abdallah also asked that the USG continue to remind others in the international community of the AU's responsibilities and strong anti-coup positions taken before Qadhafi assumed the presidency.

¶11. (C) Always the French: Abdallah also asked about the supposed new "Kouchner proposal." (Note: Several Mauritanian news outlets have reported that French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner will unveil a new proposal March 24 to solve the crisis. Such a proposal would entail Abdallah coming back for two months to oversee new elections. End note.) Charge said he had no information about such a proposal. Abdallah was clearly cool to the idea of the proposal, noting that it would be in essence "an acceptance of the coup." (Comment: The Kouchner "proposal" was a one-line remark in a lengthy interview published in Jeune Afrique stating that the best compromise would be for Aziz to resign and Abdallah to come back for only two months to manage the new elections. This does not appear a formal French proposal. End Comment).

Comment

¶12. (C) There was nothing significantly new in Abdallahi's analysis of the situation. Abdallahi told Charge, "I'm always happy to meet you... it seems lots of people are happy to see you," in apparent reference to recent meetings with Ely Vall and Ahmed Ould Daddah. It is possible the main motive in inviting Charge was to get the press statement out that the Americans are still with the President. Abdallahi appeared concerned about the impact of the Qadhafi visit on international solidarity against the coup noting that nobody by the Francophonie's Dioff had openly criticized Qadhafi's "mediation."

HANKINS